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ABSTRACT

The beliefs and experiences of three college teachers at a college of business are described to examine assumptions about teaching and its improvement. One of the teachers was a full professor who had spent 12 years with a consulting firm and continued to work as a consultant. Classroom observation revealed that he was an outstanding narrator who used many examples. The emphasis was the ability to apply insights from old settings to new ones. A second teacher, an associate professor, placed a high value on challenging and questioning students, and created an intense atmosphere in the classroom. The approach focused on the capacity to analyze and evaluate. The third teacher's approach was centered on lecturing and students' taking notes, with a structured syllabus. This method is based on the assumption that organization and structure facilitate learning. The following recommendations are offered: teachers should be accepting of their limitations as well as their strengths; teachers should respect the resistance students sometimes display; teachers should try something new in teaching on a modest scale at first; and teachers should combine challenging and reinforcing students. (SW)

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COLLEGE TEACHING MONOGRAPH

A Look at Assumptions About Teaching and Its Improvement

by

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COLLEGE TEACHING MONOGRAPHS

This series of monographs has been produced to bring attention to significant ideas and developments in college teaching. The series allows college teachers at the University of North Dakota and elsewhere to share their insights and their experimentation with approaches to college level learning and instruction.

Each essay has been written to be interesting--and even helpful--to other college teachers. The authors, by putting their ideas and approaches in the public view, invite peer and citizen review. But, above all, these essays give acknowledgement, even celebration, to excellence in college teaching.

You are invited to contribute to this monograph series with your own essay or by encouraging colleagues to write about their teaching. The Office of Instructional Development, at the University of North Dakota, provides editorial assistance in the preparation of each monograph. Each essay is reviewed by the editors and an editorial panel for quality of thought and experimentation and for interest to other college teachers.

We hope you enjoy this series.

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A Look at Assumptions About Teaching and Its Improvement

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Our assumptions are the crystal structure of our teaching. Assumptions, the way I use the term, are the premises about learning and teaching that form the logic of our pedagogy. Assumptions are the propositions we start with. Their structure and aggregation influence the manner of our teaching, although these patterns are not necessarily visible to students nor known to us--hence the metaphor of the crystal. To the extent that these assumptions are known to us, they comprise our theory or "philosophy" of education.

Here are several assumptions whose acceptance or rejection influences how we teach: "I am responsible for my students' learning"; "students need lots of positive reinforcement"; "anxiety is inimical to learning"; "I'm not interested in my students' feelings, it's their minds I want to reach"; "you have to teach students to think"; "learning is very hard work"; "a teacher has to be confident"; "it's the teacher's job to keep discussions on track."

I spend a good deal of time discussing teaching with dozens of professors each year, on my own campus mostly, but occasionally on other campuses around the country. Whenever I can, I like to ask them to explore their goals for different courses and the assumptions underlying them.

If I'm lucky, I'll be invited to visit one or two of their classes where I'll have an opportunity to compare what I see going on with what they have told me. These are the most stimulating moments in my work with

college faculty. Much of what I have learned about pedagogy can be traced to these discussions and classroom visits. In the following paragraphs I want to "present" three college teachers, using their beliefs and experiences to "Look at Assumptions About Teaching and Its Improvement."

Ralph is a full professor in a school of business in the Midwest. He is in his mid-fifties and teaches courses in organization theory and management. Before moving to the university, the only place he has ever taught, he spent twelve years with a well-known consulting firm. He continues to work as a consultant in his spare time, particularly during summers.

I had heard from several sources that Ralph was a locally "famous" teacher, having once won the university's prize for teaching, and nearly always attracting more students to his courses than seats available.

I was drawn to him right away in our first meeting, not only by his ingenuousness, but by his skillful manner of telling stories. He reminded me of Charles Dickens. Even now I can recall details of the verbal sketches he made of people and events, usually taken from his consulting work. I've always defended work of this sort because of the perspective it can provide, compelling us to check our theories against the world of concrete experience.

When I asked Ralph to discuss his teaching, he said:

> I'm as careful of the way I present myself as I am of the way I present the content of my courses. I want to show students how a person thinks and works in this field, how he addresses the organization, interacts with people, solves problems. That's why I use cases and detailed examples in my presentations. That's why I draw on my own experience in the field. I hope some of my own excitement will rub off onto my students. I always try to take a positive view of things, the way Arnold Palmer says to do in golf. I suppose I'm a little egotistical. Sometimes I get carried away.

When Ralph asked if I'd be interested in coming to one of his classes, I said yes right away, confident the hour would be lively. I was not disappointed. It was a course offered in the MBA program.

Evidently he had presented Maslow's hierarchy of needs the day before. He began the period by summarizing it briefly, then asking, "how could you use this scheme in motivating people who work for you in your companies?" (Many people in the course were managers already, Ralph had told me.)

I timed the silence. After five seconds, Ralph rephrased the question: "Suppose you are a shift supervisor at the Ford Motor Assembly plant . . . how could Maslow's scheme help you?" Someone began answering almost right away, followed by other members of the class. In minutes, six students had contributed something to the conversation. Just as the pace really picked up, he changed gears and headed into the day's work, a detailed examination of several of the "levels" cited by Maslow, using Ralph's experience as the source of illustrations. As far as I could tell by looking around the room from time to time, no one's attention wandered for long.

"Ralph is a compelling narrator," I wrote in my notes. "He uses examples that are memorable. He has more voices than an actor, and more animation than some whole departments put together. I'd like to interview some of Ralph's students."

"Sure you can," he said when I mentioned this.

In the next week or so I spoke with several students in the class, most of whom regarded him as highly as I did. Two students did not, one because he thought "students have perspectives too, and we ought to be able to use them in the course"; the other because "the course is somewhat d[illegible]-jointed: it moves from topic to topic with few clearly developed transitions."

I asked each of them to identify another member of the business school faculty who was closer than Ralph to their ideal of an outstanding teacher.

The first student led me to Nancy, an associate professor in Ralph's department, fifteen years younger, a respected author in finance, and widely acknowledged by colleagues as a "first-rate intellect." My interview with her, though not as entertaining as the session with Ralph, was at least as remarkable, mainly because Nancy's philosophy of teaching placed a high value on making students uncomfortable, "challenging them" to use her phrase. She said:

> I want my students to use their minds in these courses, so I put the burden on them right from the start. I give them homework that requires procedures I haven't taught them yet. Sure they squirm and resist, but they also learn how to break a complex problem into its constituent parts, how to evaluate a solution proposed by someone else. Students are far more able to profit from an explanation after discovering they need it. Too many people in our society don't think for themselves. Our economy is so badly off these days, our suppositions so limited, we need all the thinking we can get. I insist on it, in discussions and in written assignments.

I asked if she'd object to my visiting some of her classes. "Come any time," she said. Where Ralph was the center of attention in his class, Nancy's students were on stage in her class. I felt the tension build as she phrased a question like, "What stands out to you about this solution?" Sometimes a whole minute passed before a student spoke, a minute that seemed hours long to me, a stranger in the back of the room. How long must it seem to her students?

Slowly at first, perhaps even painfully, Nancy's students critiqued the author's method for resolving a certain financial problem. What did Nancy do? She evaluated their critiques! At the end of the hour I was ready for some coffee. So was she.

"I had a teacher once who told us not to be afraid of silence, either in us or in others. Silence is to the thinker what clay is to the potter. The best questions can't be answered off the top of your head. They take time to think about." As I listened to her, my eyes and ears wide open after the intensity of the class, I settled back expecting to hear Nancy expatiate on the class hour, but she stopped, stirred some sugar into her coffee, looked straight at me, and said, "What thoughts do you have about it?" In that moment, in its stretching into other moments, I scrambled for a response.

Later I realized that I had had a taste of her teaching as we sat drinking coffee. I remembered what a friend told me Al Capone said once about his work: "You can get a lot further with kind words and a gun than with kind words alone." Silence, it seemed to me, is like Al Capone's gun: it commands attention, demands a response, won't go away. Without it, Nancy's students might never learn the difference between their thinking and someone else's. As Nancy said, "They'll try every trick in the book to get me to answer my own questions, to do their thinking for them. But I resist pretty well."

I still had one more teacher to see, Virgil, identified by the student who found Ralph to be "somewhat disjointed."

Virgil was the youngest of the trio, about 35 I guessed, recently promoted to associate professor, an author of some visibility, a specialist in management. I recognized him right away, even though we'd never met. I knew the type well:

> I'm very traditional. On the first day of class they get a detailed syllabus, including the readings assigned for each meeting, and the dates of the three tests. I also give them a copy of an old exam so they won't have to psyche me out. I take attendance and discourage cuts. I lecture from a detailed

> outline and encourage students to ask questions. Most do not. My job is to present them with the material in this rapidly-expanding field, and this requires careful organization. We have few discussions. What's the point? They can discuss things all they want before or after class. I never liked seminars where students did the teaching. They seemed to be a waste of time.

My visit to Virgil's classes showed exactly what he said I'd see: "Me lecturing and the students taking notes." Where I had been struck by Ralph's narrative prowess, and then by Nancy's powerful questions, I was drawn right away to Virgil's structure, to the architecture of the hour, the ample way his expertise filled out the spaces. "I bet he's read everything in his field," I wrote in a note. I used to have a literature professor with a similar love for structure and detail, an amazing amount of which I can still recall after twenty years.

At this point I thought I had enough material for a novel, for surely it would take that kind of treatment to do justice to these three teachers, to respect their sense of their own roles, the character of their assumptions, the impacts they have on the students and on me.

I thought of epitaphs: Virgil the Omniscient; Nancy the Thinker; Ralph the Practitioner. I thought of cryptic shorthands to tell them apart: Virgil assumes memory is the most precious gift; Nancy prizes the capacity to analyze and evaluate; Ralph believes in the ability to apply insights from old settings to new ones.

None of them is perfect, I reminded myself. Ralph ought to read more of the literature in the field, and keep his mouth closed now and then. Nancy might try a lecture occasionally. My hunch is that she could add that to her repertory with little difficulty, thereby making her courses more accessible to some students from time to time. Virgil could challenge students intellectually more than he does, perhaps by using cases in his teaching, perhaps by requiring more writing.

What does all this suggest about the improvement of teaching? I think we must begin by taking stock of the assumptions we make about our teaching. Every assumption has its limitations, I keep telling myself, even mine. Ralph's premise that his own experience is an important natural resource for his students is valid. So is Nancy's belief that her students must attempt to learn on their own before she can teach them. So is Virgil's assumption that organization and structure facilitate learning. Each is valid, yet each is limited.

With each assumption, certain student responses can be anticipated. Some students will be more engaged by a particular teacher than others. It is quite likely that among students who sing Nancy's praises will be some who are critical of Ralph's stories or of Virgil's scholarly citations. I recommend telling students what our assumptions are. Such openness may help them understand why they are frustrated in our classes. Moreover, if we make our suppositions explicit, students can help us see their limitations.

Let me finish this piece by suggesting some of my own assumptions. Let me try to make them explicit, and to understand their value and their limitations.

· Remember that it is students themselves who are responsible for learning. We can create conditions that are hospitable to their efforts, but we must never forget their right not to learn. I say this because I have seen teachers suffer over an occasional student whom they "cannot reach." The implication is often that this is mainly the teacher's failure, but this is not necessarily so.

· I encourage faculty to be generous to themselves, to resist the urge to divide their teaching into strengths and weaknesses, although I know how irresistible that urge is. I do not consider Virgil's preoccupation

with organization and symmetry a "weakness," the way falsifying data would be. I find that teachers who are very harsh on themselves have a difficult time changing; whereas faculty who are accepting of themselves, who do not exclude their limitations from their regard, seem to change more easily.

· Respect the resistance students sometimes display toward our bright ideas. "Students are very much like people," a colleague told me years ago. He's right. They dig their heels in for the same reasons we do--this is hard, or disturbing. This is a particularly important injunction for teachers like Nancy; the demands she makes for genuine thinking trouble many students at first, and may continue to do so to the very end of the course. Nancy will continue to foster student resistance, though it may be some consolation to remember that resistance is often the herald of insight. Most of us can remember a professor whose stock in our eyes has soared as time has passed.

· If you've made up your mind to try something new in your teaching, do it on a modest scale first. If you've never used cases, don't start by building an entire course around them. Adopting a new method requires more than boning up on a few techniques. It may mean getting used to new assumptions, something Ralph will discover if he tries to teach in more evocative ways, like Nancy. When we try to modify our teaching we are faced with modifying important parts of the self, so I tell faculty to go slowly.

· Teach for yourself as well as for students. The most vital teachers I know take their own learning seriously, and expect to be stimulated by their students. Doing something in a course because you enjoy teaching it is at least as persuasive a reason for including it as "because they need

to know it in the next course." I encourage faculty to be a little selfish in their teaching, telling them it is a legitimate larceny.

· The most successful teachers I know have learned ways to challenge students and support them. A teacher who always challenges or who always supports, whose basic assumption about learning is that it takes only one and not the other, is less resourceful than the teacher who presumes value in the combination. Ralph, Nancy, and Virgil, who are unlike in many ways, have this in common: they are not afraid of disturbing students, nor are they afraid of reinforcing them. Each of them combines these tendencies in special ways, but the belief in both values helps account for their success.

Our assumptions about teaching and its improvement, like these of mine, we fashion from our concrete experiences with teachers and students. Observations and discussions with teachers like Ralph, Nancy, and Virgil, help crystalize these assumptions and draw attention again to their central place in our work as teachers.